



State Senator

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VALDE GARCIA

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Shiawassee-Livingston-southern Ingham counties

Coffee Break News

Budget deal reached

Legislators and the Governor announced this week that a compromise was reached to solve Michigan's \$920 million budget deficit. The deal guarantees an income-tax cut in 2004 while providing additional revenue to soften cuts to public schools, higher education and local governments. It also includes an incentive for small businesses to provide greater healthcare benefits to their employees by reducing an onerous tax burden 50 percent by the January 2007.

The income-tax rollback will be paused for six months and an additional \$12 million in administrative cuts for state government will be made. The cuts to K-12, higher education and revenue sharing were reduced from the governor's original proposal because the roughly \$77 million raised by pausing the rollback will be divided among schools, universities and local governments.

MEGA sent to Governor

After it passed the House of Representatives this week, legislation reauthorizing the Michigan Economic Growth Authority Act was sent by the Senate to the Governor for approval. This legislation will ensure that Michigan continues to be competitive in attracting new businesses and encourages current businesses to expand, creating more job opportunities for Michigan residents. It is one of the main programs in the nine-point Republican "JOBS" plan - Job Opportunities for Business Success. MEGA was set to expire Dec. 31, 2003. Approval of the package will extend the program until Dec. 31, 2009.

Senate sends venture capital package to Governor

The Senate passed and sent to the Governor a venture capital package to help make Michigan more attractive to business investment as part of the Republicans' JOBS plan to fight for jobs in the Great Lakes state. Venture capital allows entrepreneurs to start businesses, frequently high-tech ventures, and create the jobs of tomorrow. Michigan currently ranks 34th among the 50 states in venture capital investments. The majority of high-tech industrial states rank well above Michigan. Most Great Lakes states outrank Michigan as well, including Minnesota (16th), Pennsylvania (17th), Illinois (18th), Ohio (31st) and Wisconsin (32nd). Introduced in November, the package comprises Senate Bills 834-836.

Intoxicated doctors face penalties

Legislation that would make it a misdemeanor for a licensed healthcare professional to perform treatment on a patient while under the influence of alcohol or a controlled substance is under consideration in the Senate. It would prohibit healthcare workers from practicing with a bodily alcohol content of .05 gram or more. The legislation also provides for criminal and administrative sanctions to be imposed for violators and will require participation in the Health Professional Recovery Program.

Garcia's Payday lending regulation on its way to Governor

Legislation to regulate the payday lending industry was approved this week by both the Senate and House of Representatives. Senate Bill 474 establishes the maximum interest rate payday lenders could charge at 13.25 percent of the loan's face value. Other components of the bill require payday lenders to be licensed by the Office of Financial and Insurance Services (OFIS); place limits on both the size and duration of the loans; require providers to post notices explaining the service; establish a channel for customer complaints; and give OFIS the authority to punish providers for not protecting consumers. The bill now goes to the Governor.

Senators want scholarships allowed for religious-studies students

A package of bills making college theology, divinity and religious education majors eligible for scholarships or grant money from the state of Michigan will be taken up by the full Senate after the Education Committee recommended it last week. The five-bill package would end the practice of discrimination against certain types of academic study. At present, some students don't have equal access to the more than \$242 million in grants and scholarships awarded yearly to students simply because they choose to study theology. In one instance, a student filed a lawsuit against the state earlier this year over this issue. A federal district judge ruled the state is prohibited from enforcing the statute preventing the student from receiving scholarship money.

The package would affect five programs: the Michigan Merit Award scholarship, the Michigan Educational Opportunity Grant, the Michigan Competitive Scholarship, the Part-time Independent Student Grant, and the state's Tuition Grant programs.

Firefighter training fund

The Senate is working on legislation to address concerns that Michigan firefighters do not receive all the necessary training because of funding problems. The proposed legislation would establish a dedicated Firefighter Training Fund. Tradition ally, funding for firefighter training is the responsibility of local municipalities. The cost of training a new recruit is approximately \$4,400 per firefighter, not including wages or equipment.

Legislature demands harsher penalties for improper burials

The Senate and House have concurred on legislation to impose harsher penalties for the improper disposal of a deceased person. Senate Bills 508 and 511 make improper disposal of human remains and failure to dispose of human remains in a timely manner felonies, carrying maximum 10 year prison sentences. The legislation was introduced in response to the horrific tragedy last year in Noble, Ga. There, a crematorium was found to have dumped on its property more than 300 bodies that were meant for cremation. Ashes provided to families were later found to be wood chips and cement dust. SBs 508 and 511 now go before the Governor for her signature.